

Moon Water

Excerpt

Preface

Nibi pulled her shawl tight against the midnight chill. The unearthly call of the weathered dreamcatcher had beckoned her from a sound sleep. Studying the portal in the center of the web, she understood why. A human darkness lurked among the shadows, patiently watching, waiting for a chance to hurt the woman-child she loved.

“Not this night.” Eyes skyward, Nibi raised her hands and chanted an ancient Monacan prayer. High, swirling winds caught the plea and carried it toward the moonlit peaks to the south.

Gazing into the portal again, Nibi shivered, but not because of the cold. Another darkness loomed at the edge of her sight, lifeless, yet more powerful than any she’d known. This darkness would not be stopped as easily, if at all. Either way, the price they’d pay would be dear.

Stepping to the edge of the porch, Nibi studied the sleeping valley below. Closing her eyes, she appealed for the wisdom of those who had come before. In the wee hours of the morning, she had an answer. Some things must end for others to begin.

CHAPTER 1

Central Virginia
Summer 1969

Velvety moss cushioned Nettie’s back as she enjoyed to the soft, meandering sounds of the Piney River and the sweet smell of blooming honeysuckle. The small glade had been a perfect hideaway for her and Andy since grade school. The smooth, tangled roots of the old riverbank trees made comfortable benches, and their long, arching limbs provided a shady respite. Coupled with the eventide, the glade’s thick forest walls and leafy canopy still offered them secrecy.

Andy’s strong arm under her head and his hand on the curve of her hip were warm, comforting. Not long ago, Nettie would have punched any boy who tried to put his hands on her like this, but not now, and not Andy. They’d been exploring the rhythms of this almost-dance at River’s Rest since the weather turned, enjoying togetherness yet managing to stop on the good side of bad. Tonight, things were different. She and Andy were touching, but miles apart. Nettie knew the reason why but wasn’t ready to have that conversation. Brushing her fingertips along Andy’s jawline, she opened her lips to kiss him just as the wind began to blow. The layered treetop canopy pitched back and

forth, slowly at first, then harder and faster, whipping leaves and surrounding them with eerie shadows. Nettie couldn't tell her goose bumps from Andy's.

"Storm coming?" she asked.

Andy pushed to his knees and scanned the moon-colored river bank. "Maybe. It doesn't feel like rain, but somethings off."

Sitting back on his heels, he pulled Nettie up. "Come on. We should go."

"But—"

"I know. We should go."

Nettie tucked in her blouse, embarrassed at not wanting to.

Getting in the car, she slid to her usual position in the middle of the seat and lightly bumped Andy's shoulder. "You said you wanted to come here tonight."

"I thought I did." He hesitated, gold specks flickering in his warm but troubled eyes. "Do you love me?"

Nettie slumped. Ready or not, the conversation had started. Words, right, wrong and in-between, surged behind her eyes but not one made it to her mouth.

"You know I love you, but you've never said it back to me. Not once."

Most of the time, it wasn't in Nettie to be anything other than straight up, a trait that had cost her plenty in the past, and most likely would again. She cared about Andy, enjoyed his company, and his touch. She couldn't imagine him not being in her life, but the idea of forever love unnerved her, what it was supposed to feel like, the commitments that came with it, what it would mean for both of them. "I don't know."

Andy tensed and leaned against the car door. "What about the guy you met last summer? Mitchell. Did you love him?"

The memory of Mitchell stung as bad as the pain and jealousy in Andy's voice. She and Andy had grown up best friends, but since they'd started high school he'd made no secret about wanting more, even asking her to go steady last summer before she left on vacation. Nettie hadn't been interested in a boyfriend then, much less a steady one; however, spending the summer in the Alabama Wiregrass had changed all that. She'd met Mitchell, a handsome, troubled teen who knew better than anyone what love was and was not. By the time she returned to Virginia her perspective on love and relationships had changed.

"We've been through this, Andy. I cared about Mitchell. He helped me figure out a lot of things. Growing up, some of the boy-girl stuff, and how to choose to be happy even when

you have no reason to be. But that's not forever love. I don't know what that kind of love is. I want to know what it means before I say the words."

Andy's jaw tightened as he turned away.

Nettie didn't bother to hide the frustration in her voice. "How do you know? I mean, really know you love me like that? Forever is a long damn time when we're barely thinking past tomorrow. You already know what you want to do and what you want to be. A year from now you'll be off to West Point, just like your father. And, I'll still be here trying to figure out what I want to do."

Andy found Nettie's hand in the dark. "Look, all I know is that I've loved you since the day we met in the sandbox. I can't imagine life without you. I don't want to imagine it without you."

"I'm not ready."

His voice softened as he let go of her hand. "You've always moved slower than me when it comes to us, but it's tough being with you when you don't know how you feel. I love you. I need to know you love me too. If you're not sure, maybe we need to take a break until you know one way or the other."